



THE MERCHANT'S CLERK,

A LEGEND OF THE OLD TIME IN LONDON.

DINING some time back with a friend, whose house is situated in one of those out-of-the-way courts in the City, where one would hardly think of searching for anything picturesque or beautiful, but which, nevertheless, abound with various rich memorials of the past; while seated with him at his window, overlooking a small yard containing two mulberry-trees at least a century old, I observed, with no small sorrow, that an old stone wall, the rounded gable of which was pregnant with recollections of the reigns of Elizabeth and the first James, was being removed, in all probability to be succeeded by a piece of modern, uninteresting brick-work. By this removal, however, another morsel of antiquity, which had previously been concealed, was now exposed to view: this consisted of a hovel or shed, built against one of the interior sides of this stone wall, and apparently the remains of some more extensive and important building; for though, in many places, the large, irregularly-shaped slates had been displaced, or perhaps had fallen away, and been re-placed by modern tiling, still several of the massive stone pillars, supporting strong oaken arches, were remaining, and appeared as though they were the vestiges of a colonnade or cloister, which at some former period had run round the whole interior of the wall. I mentioned this idea to my friend, who concurred with me that it was probably correct.

"By the way," observed he, "the spot which

has attracted your observation, I believe even that very shed, was once the scene of a murder, the perpetration and discovery of which were attended by some very singular circumstances."

This information, of course, led to an inquiry on my part; and that, in its turn, elicited the following Legend of London:—

Towards the middle of the second half of the seventeenth century, or in plainer English, about the year of grace, 1672, there lived in London a very rich, and therefore very respectable merchant, who, having come to the rare resolution that he had made money enough, and having, as he said, no kith or kin, tacked to this said resolution one of more frequent occurrence, namely, that he would take a wife, to be the superintendent of his household affairs, the sharer of his fortune, the soother of his sorrows, if ever he should have any, and so forth. And to a man of so much importance as was Master Edward Edwards, there were very few obstacles in the way of his accomplishing such a purpose, as he might easily pick and choose among the maidens or widows of his ward, who would all be but too proud of an alliance with so honourable and substantial a citizen. He did not, however, deliberate so long on the matter as might perhaps have been expected, seeing how wide a field he had wherein to exercise his speculations; for at the same time that he informed those friends, whom he chose to consult on the occasion, of his before-named in-

tention, he gave them to understand that his choice had already fallen on Dorothy Langton, the daughter of a poor Goldsmith, and reputed papist, but, nevertheless, a maiden of good fame, seemly bearing, and twenty-six years of age. She was tall, fair, and well made, but with nothing striking about her face that would call for particular description, unless one may advert to—what indeed was not part of her face—an unusual breadth at the back part of her head, behind her ears, which seemed to give her features an appearance of being too small. The lady was, truth to confess, not very much admired in the neighbourhood; and, to continue the confession, she was as little liked. She was said by those who knew her best, or rather as it might seem worst, to be of a sullen temper, and yet, withal, violent; and the death of one young man was laid at her door, all the way from the East Indies, whither he had gone in despair, after having been for eleven months her accepted suitor, and then discharged in a fit of piquefulness. How far this incident, which happened before she was twenty, might have formed her after character; or how far even her earlier character might have been moulded from the fact of her having been left motherless while yet an infant, and bred up afterwards under the sole care of her father, a harsh and severe man, it is not for me to determine; and much less so, how or why Master Edward Edwards came to fix on her as his partner. Master Edwards himself, at the time we are speaking of, was in the very prime and vigour of life—that is, in his own opinion; it may be stated, however, that he was in his five-and-fiftieth year; rather corpulent and very grey: but the former fact he asserted, and not without truth, was a proof of his stoutness: some men, he observed, quite young men too, (that is, younger than himself,) had contracted a bad habit of stooping, which shewed their walk through life had not been upright; then, as to his grey hairs, he boasted that they were once the veriest black, but that thought and honourable labour had blanched them; besides, his worst foes could not say he was bald. For the rest, Master Edwards was a man of tolerable parts, as times went, of an easy and good temper, and one who loved to crack his bottle and his joke as well any man living, either now or then.

For some time, say thirteen months, after the marriage, they lived together in all seeming harmony. I say seeming, of course speaking only of what met the eyes of others; for far be it from me to intrude any unnecessary inquiry into the discomforts or discrepancies (if any such existed) of the domestic circle—a rather small one, to be sure, seeing it consisted of only two individuals, unless as a third segment thereof, may be reckoned Master Edwards' clerk, a young man, an orphan, of the name of Simon, who had lived with him from his childhood. He was a youth of good favour, but did not seem to find it in his mistress's eyes; or rather, latterly, he did not: for at her first coming she had behaved with great kindness to him, while he, on the other

hand, always treated her with that distant respect, so becoming in an inferior, but so mortifying to a superior, who may happen, for some purpose or other, to wish to be on more familiar terms. After a little time, Mistress Edwards evidently took a great dislike to poor Simon, and by the exercise of a little domestic despotism, she made his home sufficiently uncomfortable. Master Edwards seldom interfered in the matter; and to do his wife justice, she concealed the alteration she had caused in the lad's comforts, as much as she could from his master; and if ever he did happen to make any reference to the subject, she was pat with a complaint against Simon for being so often away from the house; which was no more than truth, as she frequently made it too hot to hold him; and also that during his absence, he was continually seen to be in very bad company—at which his master would sigh; and which I am sorry to say was also no less than the truth, and probably the consequence of her harsh treatment. Various little trinkets and other nic-nacs were also said by Mistress Edwards to be from time to time missing—and her lamentations and anger on such subjects were always uttered in Simon's hearing, plentifully interlarded with expressions of wonder, “who the thief could be,”—and assertions, “that such things could not walk off without hands:” whereat her facetious husband never failed to remark, “Yes, deary, they might, if they had feet.” And this as regularly put her in a passion, and made her vow that, “for her part, she could not see what use there was in keeping about the house such lazy, loitering, good-for nothing vagabonds,” with various other such ungentle epithets, all of which were quite plainly launched at the unfortunate Simon.

At the end of these thirteen months, Simon, together with several articles of plate, was found missing in real earnest—all mere suspicion on the subject being removed by the following note, which Master Edwards found on his breakfast-table:—

“Even in the very commission of a deed of wrong and villainy, can I not refrain from bidding you farewell—my kind, mine honoured, my loved master!—even while I am doing wrong to you. But I am driven to it, and away from your house, by the cruel and unjust treatment of your wife: beware of her, master of mine, for she is evil. Whither I go, God knows—I care not—not will He; for I have abandoned his ways, and broken his commands—but I am forced to it—forced to rob, that I may not starve of hunger—to rob you, to whom I owe every thing—but indeed, in deed I would not solo, knew I not that what I take from you can be little missed, and that if I spoke to you, you would not let me quit your house: and sure I am, that if I did so without means of living, you would sorrow that the child of your fostering—the boy of your rearing—whom you have ever treated more as a son than a servant, should be * * *”

The words that immediately followed were quite illegible, being so blotted, as though the

writer had written over drops of water: then followed a short thick dash of the pen—and then in a large and hurried hand, the following:—

"But this is foolish—and fallacy—farewell, Sir,—dear master, farewell:—forgive me—I cannot pray for you—I ask you not to pray for me—but do, if you think it will avail me aught—if not, forget me—and oh! forgive me. I am going wrong—good bye."

The signature was also much blotted, but it could be traced to be, "the thankful orphan, Simon."

The effect produced by this event was very different, both on Master Edwards and his wife—as well as from what might have been expected: the former, to use a homely word, took on greatly about the matter, was evidently much hurt, became silent and abstracted, and went so far as to shed tears; a thing which his oldest friends—those who had been his school-fellows—declared they had never known him do in all his life—not even when under the infliction of Doctor Everard's cane—the right-reverend high master of Saint Paul's School, where Master Edwards had learned Latin and peg-top. Mistress Edwards, on the other hand, shewed a great share of rejoicing on the occasion, declaring she thought his room cheaply purchased at the loss of the trumpery he had taken with him. That same afternoon, during dinner, she hinted that she had already a young man in her eye, as the successor of Simon; at which observation, her husband merely sighed, and made no inquiries—and yet he probably had no conception whom his wife had in her eye, though if some of their neighbours had been present, they might, if they had liked it, have helped him to an inuendo concerning a handsome young man, of whom no one knew any thing, except that he was frequently seen walking with Mistress Edwards of evenings under the tall elms in Goodman's Fields. There were some hints of a yet more scandalous nature—but these shall be omitted.

The stranger however came after the situation, and a handsome young man he was—his name was Lambert Smith—but as for his qualifications for the new place, which Mistress Edwards really seemed uncommonly anxious he should obtain, as little had best be said as may be; and the less need be said as Master Edwards was decidedly of opinion that he was utterly unfit for the office; for the expression of which opinion he was downright scolded by his wife, and indeed fairly warned that she would have her own way after all.

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A few nights after Simon's departure—a dark and stormy November night it was—Mistress Edwards was seen—no matter yet by whom—to cross the cloistered court-yard, at the back of her husband's house, bearing a lantern in her hand, which she partially covered over with the large cloak wherein she was muffed, probably with the intention of concealing its light—perhaps only to prevent its being extinguished by the

gustful wind and rain. She approached a low postern-gate, which gave into a passage leading to Cripplegate Church—she unlocked it—opened it hesitatingly—looked out as though for some one—came back again—re-locked the door—placed the lantern in one of the angles of the cloister, and began slowly pacing up and down under its shelter. In a few moments, she stopped, and listened—her body and head slightly bent rightward, towards the postern; a low whistle was heard without—she flew to the gate—opened it, and let in a man also muffled in a cloak: she addressed him, by exclaiming, "Late, Sir!"

The stranger began some excuse probably, but was at once stopped by a sharp "hush!" and they conversed in whispers.

At length they shifted their position, advanced towards the house, Mistress Edwards having taken up her light, and leading her companion forward with the other hand. Of a sudden the man stopped, and she also. He sighed, and said, though still in a whisper—"I cannot do it."

"God gi' me patience!" she cried, impatiently, and in a much louder tone: then in a lower, added—"Come, Lambert, dearest Lambert, take heart."

"I cannot, indeed I cannot—any thing but that!"

"Any thing *but* that! Why, what else is there to be done? Will you not be master of all?—of me? Nay, come, dear Lambert."

The man passed on. As he turned a second angle, close to the house door, a sharp-pointed weapon was driven into his breast, by some one standing behind one of the thick stone pillars, and with such force, that the point pierced one of the ribs, which prevented the wound from being mortal. The young man shrieked with agony; and grasping towards the spot whence the blow came, seized hold of part of the assassin's dress, who struggled, and extricated himself from his grasp, but left behind him part of a chain, with a watch hung to it: at the same time he wrenched the dagger from the lacerated bone, and, with a surer blow, drove it into his victim's heart.

All this was the work of little more than a moment; during which Mistress Edwards, who at first had been struck with a stupor of surprise and horror, rushed forward, screaming "Murder! murder!" and fell, swooning, within a few paces of the body.

When she recovered, she found several of her neighbours and of the watch standing round, and among them her alarmed husband. She looked round wildly for a moment, fixed her eyes on him for another, then shrieked wildly—"Ah! I see—I see—hein! Scize him—the murderer," and again fell senseless.

Edwards was accordingly seized, though few could understand why or wherefore; but when he protested he knew nothing about the matter, people began to think him guilty, especially as some declared the murdered man was the same youth with whom his wife had been often seen

walking under the tall elms in Goodman's Fields; and, upon her second recovery, Mistress Edwards confirmed this declaration by clinging round the young man's body, and calling for vengeance on the murderer of her Love.

Edwards was carried before a justice of the peace, and, after a short examination, committed to Newgate to take his trial in the Court-house there at the next session, which was to take place within a week.

The day came, and the trial commenced. At the very outset an argument arose between the counsel for the prosecution and the defence, whether the exclamations used by the wife on the night of the murder, accusing her husband, could be given as evidence by those who had heard them. For the defence it was urged, that as a wife could not appear as a witness either against or for her husband, so neither could any expression of hers, tending to criminate him, be admissible; on the other hand, it was contended that as confessions were admissible in evidence against a party, so a husband and wife, being as one in the eye of the law, such expressions as these were in the nature of confessions by the party himself, and therefore should be admitted—and so the Recorder decided they should be. In addition to this, other—circumstantial—evidence was produced against the prisoner; the poniard, with which Lambert had been stabbed, and which in falling he had borne down out of his slayer's hand, was a jewelled Turkish one, known by many to be the property of the prisoner, and to have been in his possession many years; he having brought it home with him from one of his voyages to the Morea; the watch also was produced, which, with part of the chain, the deceased had held in his clenched hands; it was a small silver one, shaped like a tulip, and chequered in alternate squares of dead and bright metal; its dial-plate of dead silver, figured, with a bright circle, containing black Roman figures; in the interior, on the works, it bore the inscription—"Thomas Hooke, in Pope's-head-alley," the brother to the celebrated Robert Hooke, who had recently invented the spring-pocket-watches. This watch was proved to have also been the property of the prisoner, to have been given by him to his wife, and lately to have been returned by her to him in order to be repaired. These circumstances, together with the natural imputation that was cast upon him by the consideration of who the murdered man was, were all that were adduced against Edwards; and he was called on for his defence in person, being, by the mild mercy of the English law, denied the assistance of counsel for that purpose: it being wisely considered, that though a man in the nice intricacies of a civil cause may need technical aid, he cannot possibly do so in a case where the fact of his life being dependant on the success of his pleading, must necessarily induce and assist him to have all his wits about him. The prisoner's situation, however, in this instance, seemed, unaccountably, to have the contrary effect on him, and he appeared quite embarrassed

and confused; he averred he could not explain the cause of his wife's extraordinary error; but that an error it certainly had been. For the poniard's being in the man's heart he was equally at a loss to account; and as for the watch, he admitted all that had been proved, but declared that he had put it by about a week before the murder in a cabinet, which he had never since opened, and how it had been removed he was unable to tell. Of course this defence, if such it could be termed, availed him very little, in fact simply nothing. The jury found him guilty; and the Recorder called on him to say why judgment should not be pronounced against him.

The prisoner seemed suddenly to have recovered his old, or gained new powers; he broke out into a strong and passionate appeal, calling on the judge to believe his word, as that of a dying man, that he was innocent, and concluded by solemnly calling upon God so to help him, as he spoke the truth.

He was condemned; the prisoner bid his face in his hand, and sobbed aloud; he was removed from the bar to his solitary cell.

About half-past ten that night, as the Recorder was sitting alone, dozing in his easy chair over the fire and a tankard of mulled claret, he was suddenly startled by a loud knock at the door; followed up by the announcement of a stranger, who would brook no delay. He was admitted—a young man, whose features were fearfully haggard and drawn, as though with some intense inward struggle; in fact, the good magistrate did not half like his looks, and intimated to his servant that as his clerk was gone home he had better stay in the room—which was on the whole a confused remark, as, in the first place, he knew his servant could not write; and in the second, he did not know whether any writing was required; but the youth relieved the worthy Recorder from his dilemma, by peremptorily stating that the communication he had to make must be made to him alone. The servant therefore withdrew, the Recorder put on his spectacles and the youth began.

"I come to tell you, Sir, that you have this day unjustly condemned an innocent man to death."

"Bah! bah! And pray how know you that he is innocent?"

"By this token, Sir, that I know who did the deed for which you have condemned Master Edwards to suffer. Lambert's murderer stands before you."

The Recorder, horror-stricken at the notion of being so close to a murderer at large, gabbled out an inarticulate ejaculation, something of an equivocal nature betwixt an oath and a prayer, and stretched out his hand towards the silver hand-bell which stood before him on the table; and still more horrified was he when the youth caught his hand, and said—"No; with your leave, Sir."

"No; with my leave, Sir! What, mean ye to murder me, with my leave Sir?"

"I will do you no harm, Sir. But my confession shall be a willing and a free one."

He removed the hand-bell beyond the Recorder's reach, let go his arm, and retired again to a respectful distance. He then proceeded to relate that his name was Simon Johnson, that he was an orphan, and had been bred up with great kindness by Master Edwards. In detailing his story, he hinted at an unlawful passion which his mistress had endeavoured to excite in his mind towards her; and to his resistance or carelessness of her wiles he partly attributed her hatred and persecution of him: his home made wretched thereby, he had sought relief in society; unfortunately for him, he had fallen in with some young men of bad character—among others with this very Lambert, who had been among his most strenuous advisers, that he should from time to time purloin some of his master's superfluous wealth, for the purpose of supplying himself and his companions with the means of more luxurious living; he had, however, for a long while rejected this advice, until at length goaded by the continual unjust accusations of his mistress, charging him with the very crime he was thus tempted to commit, he had, in truth, done so, and had absconded with several articles of value; but his companions, instead of receiving him with praise, as he had expected, had loaded him with invectives for not bringing them a richer prize. Instigated by their reproaches, and, by a mingled sense of shame and anger, he had intended, by means of a secret key which he had kept, to rob Master Edward's house on the very night when the murder was committed. Having gained access to the courtyard, he was just about to open the house door, when he heard footsteps; he retired, and concealed himself. From his place of concealment he had seen and heard Mrs. Edwards encouraging Lambert, by many fond and endearing professions of love for him, and of hatred of his master, to the murder of her husband; and as Lambert, conquered by her threats and entreaties, was passing him within arm's length, an irresistible impulse had urged him to save his master's life by sacrificing Lambert's; and having done the deed of death, he had leaped the yard wall and fled. The poinard and watch were part of the property he had stolen when he left the house. He ended thus—

"After I had left the spot, Sir, I fled, I know not whither; for days and days I wandered about in the fields, sleeping in sheds, numbed with cold and half starved, never daring to approach the dwellings of men to relieve my wants, till dark, and then ever feeling as though every eye scowled upon me; and when I left them again, and was again alone in the fields, I would suddenly start and run, with the feeling that I had been followed, and was about to be taken. In vain I strove to overcome these feelings—in vain I struggled to reconcile myself to the deed I had done—in vain I represented it to my heart as one of good, as one which had saved a life infinitely more valuable than his whom I

had slain: it was all vain, a something within tortured me with unnatural and undefinable terror; and even when I sometimes partially succeeded in allaying this feeling, and half convinced myself that I had done for the best, it seemed as if I heard a voice whisper in my own soul, 'What brought thee to thy master's courtyard that night?' and this set me raving again. Unable longer to bear this torture, I made up my mind to self-slaughter, for the thoughts of delivering myself into the hands of justice drove me almost mad; my heart was hardened against making this even late atonement, and with a reckless daring I resolved on self-slaughter; but how, how to do this, I knew not; drowning was fearful to me, I should have time perhaps to repent; and so with starving, even if nature would allow that trial. I returned to the suburbs—it was this very evening—a lantern hanging on the end of a barber's pole caught my sight—I hastened into the shop, with the intention of destroying myself with the first razor I could lay my hands on; but the shop was quite full. I sat down in a corner, doggedly waiting for my time, and paying no heed to the conversation that was going on, till my master's name struck on my ear. I listened—his trial, condemnation, and coming execution, were the general talk. I started up, and with a feeling of thankfulness to God that there was something yet to live for—I think I cried out so—I rushed out of the shop, hurried hither—I am not too late—to—to supply my master's place to-morrow."

The young man sank exhausted in a chair, and dropped his head on the table. The astonished magistrate leant forward, cautiously extended his hand, seized his hand-bell, and rang loud and long, beginning at the same time to call over the names of all the servants he had ever had from the first time of his keeping house.

But at the first jingle of the bell Simon started up from the chair, and said, "Aye, I am your prisoner now."

"Yes, Sir, yes," said the Recorder. "Geoffrey! Williams! very true, Sir—by your leave, Sir—Godwin! Ralph! there's your pri-oner, Sir," he added to the one wondering servant, who answered this multitudinous call.

The sequel may be told in a few lines. A reprieve for Edwards was immediately sent to Newgate, which was followed up by a pardon; for having been found guilty, of course he could not be declared innocent. The wretched wife of the merchant died by her own hand, on the morning of her husband's reprieve. Simon was tried for Lambert's murder, of course found guilty, and sentenced to death; but in consideration of the extraordinary circumstances attending his case, this sentence was changed into transportation for life. My Lord Chief Justice Hale delivered a very voluminous judgment on the occasion; the main ground on which he proceeded, seems to have been, that as Simon had not been legally discharged by Edwards, he might still be considered in the light of his servant,

and that he was therefore, to a certain degree, justifiable in defending his master's life.

Simon died on his passage. Edwards, from the time of his release, became a drivelling idiot: he lived several years. It was not till the death

of the old man that a secret was discovered—it was ascertained that Simon was a natural son; and that, in preventing the intended assassination of the Merchant, he had unconsciously saved the life of his Father.

